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Connecting with the pioneers

through gardening and foraging

The term “living off the land” conjures up a vision of basic freedom. We try to put a rosy image on the days when small log cabins

were the main dwellings for folks who were rebelling against what they considered government interference in their lives or who just wanted to be out on their own no matter what hardships they had to endure. Actually, the main requirements for living off the land involved more than a rosy image. It was imperative to own a few very nec-

essary items: long-barreled flintlock rifle, gun powder, lead and bullet molds, hunting knife, axe, awls for stitching moccasins, iron cooking pots, etc. Life wasn’t easy. Most of the essential items had to be obtained by barter with various animal hides such as deer, as the frontier folks had no way of manufacturing those things.

If we had to garden as the backwoodsmen and their families did, we'd quickly come to respect our modern tools and take care of them. Gardens were located in the clearings where the cabins were built and were mainly worked with crude tools fashioned from improvisation and stout tree limbs. Any metal parts of tools, such as hoe blades, had to be obtained by barter. People did not have much choice of seeds—corn, beans, and squash probably being some of the more widely cultivated plants. Seed saving was of prime necessity. Fortunately, many native food plants grew abundantly—various berries, greens of many sorts, Jerusalem artichokes, cat-tails, mushrooms, ferns,

wild fruit, nuts, etc. Friendly Indians sometimes gave helpful information on the use of native plants. Otherwise, knowledge was gained on a trial and error basis.

We pass by many of our native plants today without giving them a second look. Not so with the frontier people. Wild food plants played a big part in their survival, as some of the plants were used to provide medicine, dyes, soap, and so on. For instance, from blackberry plants came berries for kitchen use and to make wine or brandy. In addition to culinary use, leaves were dried and roots were dug, cleaned, and dried for medicinal use and stored until needed as all parts of the plant are helpful in cases of diar-

rhea and dysentery. A teaspoonful of crushed dried root was mixed with a cup of boiling water, cooled, and drunk as a remedy. One or two cups per day were taken until the condition subsided. If fresh blackberries were in season, eating a large quantity of them also gave relief.

Nothing was so disheartening as to have a food garden wiped out by marauding Indians—and worse yet, the whole homestead. Today we gardeners fuss about slugs, cutworms, various plant diseases, and the neighbors' romping cats. Quite a contrast!

In yesterday's world, when the soil "played out" in a garden spot or game became scarce, the pioneering folk gathered up their possessions and

Left: Not only are tubers of the Jerusalem Artichoke delicious, but the plant has a fringe benefit. Its three-inch wide flowers are lovely to use in table bouquets.
Below: Tokyo Cross Turnips (hybrid) have become very popular with gardeners. Tops seldom attract aphids, and the roots are mild enough to use in salads.





Florida Broadleaf Mustard has a delightful tangy taste and is good raw or cooked. Easy to grow.

moved on to another area where survival was a little easier. Today we are more restricted in our desire to move and settle wherever a whim might take us. Also, we aren't in a fight for survival. (Of course, this depends on one's point of view.)

In our way we continue to live off the land, maybe not to the extent that our forefathers did, but the land is still here and how we use it is up to us. It's unusual now to procure one's meat supply by shooting a turkey or deer from the back door of a cabin. Instead we depend on our local markets, as there are plenty of suppliers making their living raising cattle, poultry, fish, and so on. As to the rest of the food entrepreneurs—well, they're called farmers if they have extensive acreage under cultivation. Those of us who like to have our own good quality food supply participate in a top rated recreation known as food gardening. We are not totally dependent on what we raise, but we do get a kind of deep satisfaction from living off our land, whether it is a small backyard garden or one that covers a half acre. Then there are those gardeners who like to eat, but don't give a hoot about vegetable gardening. They beautify the landscape with their flower pots and plots and enjoy their garden clubs. We tillers of the soil are a many faceted

group and our roots reach far back into the annals of time.

Our gardens still contain many descendants of the plants that sustained the pioneers, but plants have been greatly improved through hybridization and selective breeding. Take greens, for instance. Those of us who love greens look forward to harvesting many types of greens—mustard, turnip, sorrel, etc. The plant breeders have given us superior tasting turnip greens such as Tokyo Cross and White

Lady. Not only are the tops delicious, but the roots are of much better quality than the old types of turnips. The modern varieties can be used in salads as well as cooked.

Turnips

Fortunately, most vegetable seeds don't take up much room to transport and people immigrating from Europe to the New World often brought seeds with them. Turnips are thought to have originated in northeastern Europe, from which many immigrants came. Turnips are easy to raise during the cool part of spring and fall, and the plants produce an abundant crop of seed when they bolt with the coming of warm weather. Turnips will keep well when stored in a cool place. We have our refrigerators; some pioneers dug root cellars.

Mustard

Mustard is another plant of European origin which has become somewhat naturalized in places due to its huge crop of seeds. Not only is mustard desirable because of its tasty leaves, but the dried seeds may be used to make dry mustard. It is advisable to harvest the seed pods before they are completely dry, however, as

the seeds scatter when the dry pods split. Clipping the stems and hanging them upside down in cloth or paper bags will contain the seeds that would otherwise fall. When thoroughly dry, the pods may be "threshed" inside the bags, and pods and trash winnowed leaving seeds ready for use. An electric blender comes in handy to reduce seeds to a powder which may be stored indefinitely in airtight jars.

One of our most popular mustard plants today is Florida Broadleaf. It is easy to grow and it will winter over where winters are mild, providing tangy leaves to use during the cold season. A tasty sandwich may be made from bread spread with butter or mayonnaise with a generous filling of fresh mustard leaves.

Peppergrass

Many wild members of the mustard family gave sustenance to the early settlers. One is peppergrass (pepperweed, poor man's pepper) which may be found growing in dry soils on roadsides, fields, clearings, etc., throughout the United States and southern Canada. The leaves have a peppery taste and may be used raw or cooked. They're best when gathered before the seed pods form in early summer. The seeds are useful, however, as they have a hot spicy taste and add zest to soups, stews, or salads. Seeds may be dried in the same way as regular mustard seeds. Rubbing the dry stems between your hands is probably the best way to separate seed pods from stems. There is no need to do anything further as seeds aren't easily separated from pods. Store in airtight containers and use when desired.

I remember peppergrass from childhood during the Great Depression when a quantity would be gathered to put with other greens. It takes quite a bit of peppergrass alone to make a pot of greens. Only the tender leaves should be cooked, as the stalks are usually tough.



Sheep Sorrel (*Rumex acetosella* - Common Sorrel, Red Sorrel) has tiny clusters of reddish flowers along a tall stem. Tiny seeds are relished by ground feeding songbirds and foraging animals may devour the whole plant. 3/4-2 inch leaves are lance shaped with two lobes pointing outward near the leaf stem. Height is 6-18 inches.

Sheep sorrel

Those of us who have been fortunate enough to spend some of our early years in the country remember walking along paths where sheep sorrel grew in abundance. I have often picked a sorrel stem and savored the sour taste of both stem and arrow-shaped leaves. This is another plant that gives a good account of itself when leaves are mixed and cooked with other greens, or used in salads. In our garden we have French sorrel, the improved version of sheep sorrel. French sorrel has large leaves and is not so tedious to gather and rinse. Both native and improved varieties are perennials. The natives are found almost all over the United States.

There are so many useful native greens that it is impossible to mention them all—lambs quarters, purslane, poke salad, plantain, dandelion, dock, and so on. Many are perennials and will come up year after year if left

undisturbed. Most can be found throughout the United States and southern Canada and some into Mexico. If you cannot go foraging for the natives, most can be grown in gardens, taking care not to let them become invasive.

Jerusalem artichoke

Some plants yield nutritious tubers and these are usually dug after the plants have gone dormant. One of the best known is the Jerusalem artichoke, long cultivated by Indians and now found almost all over the United States. Jerusalem artichokes yield small potato-like, knobby tubers with a delicious nutty flavor. When digging the tubers it is best to dig only what is needed, leaving the rest in the ground or dug and covered with earth in a convenient place close to the kitchen. Tubers keep better covered with soil than when cleaned and refrigerated. Jerusalem artichokes may be eaten raw as a snack or in salads, and they are great fried, boiled, or scalloped. Simply wash the tubers, scrub them with a vegetable brush, and cook them as you would potatoes. (No need to peel.) The “chokes” have an advantage over potatoes as they contain no starch, but rather the carbohydrate inulin, making them safe for diabetics.

We have found through experience that Jerusalem artichokes are best grown alongside a fence as the plants can reach six to eight feet in height and tend to fall over on other plants if beset by strong winds. They can be loosely tied to the fence preventing a lot of frustration and bad words. Plants will grow in multiple soils, but seem to do best in poor soil.

Wild garlic & onion

The frontiersmen were not without plants to enhance the flavor of their meat and vegetable foods. Nothing is so widespread as members of the *Allium* genus and this includes wild onions, wild garlic, leeks, and chives.



Peppergrass (*Lepidium virginicum*, one of many peppergrasses) has tiny white flowers in cross form at tips of stems. Seeds are small, round and encased in flattened papery covers with a slight notch at the top. Leaves are lance shaped and may have several small side lobes. Overall height ranges from six to thirty inches.

If in doubt of identification, use your nose, as these plants have a distinctive onion or garlic smell. All of these are easy to grow, but, like some other plants, they may try to take over a garden. As plants tend to go dormant when hot weather advances, it may be well to snip and freeze the tops when young and tender. The bulbs may be dug when dormant and spread out to dry in a shady spot. When dry, brush off dirt and store in cheesecloth bags hung in a cool room. Use when needed.

Fruits and nuts

Native fruits and nuts composed a goodly part of the pioneers' menu. Wild plum thickets produced tart fruits for jams and jellies. Other desirable wild foods were blueberries, elderberries, blackberries, dewberries, pawpaws, muscadines, wild grapes, crab apples, persimmons, hickory nuts, native pecans, butternuts, American chestnuts (now virtually



Wild garlic is easily recognized by its growth habit of sending up a stem topped by star-shaped, pinkish-white flowers surrounding a cluster of small bulblets. The plant's grass-like leaves come up in January in the South and is easily identified by its strong onion-like odor.

wiped out by chestnut blight), black walnuts, chinquapins—the list goes on and on. Many of these natives are available today, but not in the quantities found in frontier days. Due to careless loggers, city and highway expansion, clearing of land for agriculture, etc., it is not easy to find sons of the wild plants on which the pioneers depended unless one has access to large wooded or wilderness areas.

It is still possible to forage some good things from the land, but much of it is fenced or owned by people who take a dim view of others roaming around on their property. Before climbing over any fences or trespassing on open fields or woodlands, it is well to get permission from the owner.

Poke salad

Assuming all is well with the landowner, foraging for food plants is fun. In our area (southwestern Arkansas) one of the dependable native plants is poke salad. Poke is a perennial and comes up early in the spring. Some folks cut the young shoots at ground level, but this is not a good practice as cutting the main stem can destroy a plant. It's best to clip

leaves from the plant and leave the stem unharmed.

Poke leaves are easy to clean, as insects such as aphids leave poke salad alone. Just swish the leaves in some clean water to get rid of any dust particles, and parboil, that is, bring the leaves to a boil for about three minutes in a small amount of water and drain. (Use plenty of leaves as they cook down considerably.) Put in fresh water, season as you would any greens, boil until tender and that's all there is to having a delectable pot of poke salad. Pour off water and serve. You may like to top your dish of poke with some sliced hard boiled eggs.

As a plant matures, it will produce small greenish-white flowers and then berries which will turn purple-black when mature. It is well to stop harvesting leaves when the small flower heads begin to appear, as poke is also a poisonous plant when it passes a certain stage in its growth. Leaves and stems begin to turn red. Maybe this is Nature's warning sign as the plant's phytolaccic acid content increases. If you're into making ink or dyeing, the plant is still useful as the mature berries produce a nice deep royal purple color. Birds are fond of the berries and love to eat a quantity and then bomb the nearest clothesline.

Poke salad is an easy plant to raise in a garden, but it is tall growing and should be planted along a fence out of the way of shorter plants. It is a stout plant and is seldom blown over by strong winds. Just watch for poke berries in the fall on a mature plant and save some of the seed. Plant them in the spring and thin seedlings to stand about 18 inches apart. It's best to wait until the second spring before harvesting some leaves. Poke is a perennial and will serve you well once it is established. Poke does not seem to be particular as to soil, although it is found growing at its best in rich barnyard soil.

If you are interested in foraging or raising your own native plants you should either purchase a book on

native food plants or find someone who actually goes out and forages. Hands-on experience is always the best teacher. The most expensive books covering the whole United States are not necessarily the best, so browse around for a book that contains considerable information about plants in your area and gives recipes for using the good things you want to harvest.

Foraging for useful native food plants is guaranteed to open up a whole new world for you just as it did for the early settlers. It's still possible to enjoy many of the plants that served them well. Δ

SEED SOURCES

Tokyo Cross Turnip

J.W. Jung Seed Co.
335 S. High Street
Randolph, WI 53957-0001

Vermont Bean Seed Co.
Garden Lane
Fair Haven, VT 05743-0250

White Lady Turnip

Geo. W. Park Seed Co.
1 Parkton Ave.
Greenwood, SC 29647-0001

Florida Broadleaf Mustard

Vermont Bean Seed Co.

French Sorrel

Geo. W. Park Seed Co.

Jerusalem Artichoke

Vermont Bean Seed Co.
J. W. Jung Seed Co.

Gurney's Seed & Nursery Co.
110 Capital St.
Yankton, SD 57079